

Pre-interview with Dr. Gayle Porter
Chairperson of National Alliance of Black Feminists
18 June 1997

Interview already underway at beginning of tape. Asked her what her role was in the National Alliance of Black Feminists.

Dr. Porter:...really my major role was to give it more structure and shape. In fact there was already a program when I became involved.

Q: Okay. Do you remember when in 1976 you got involved?

DP: Probably around September.

Q: What were your duties or, I guess, what were the differences between an Executive Director and a Chairperson?

DP: I guess I was responsible for a lot of the day-to-day programming. You know, with a minimal staff a lot of what we did was shared responsibility. But just some of the day-to-day operations. I was in charge of the consciousness raising groups on Saturdays. There were a couple of other programs that we had that I had direct oversight and responsibility for whereas the Executive Director had really an administrative role in terms of just negotiating with other groups, fundraising, looking very seriously at how [interruption---the group was perceived?]. But I was more the---it was a clinical component that was part of my job, too, was to make sure that---make certain that those services were known.

Q: Do you remember how you became involved with the organization?

DP: Very clearly. I was a counselor at an elementary school in Chicago. My responsibilities there were eighth grade students who were graduating were processed for various high schools and there was a magnet school in our area that was a favorite for both girls and boys because it was one of the primary schools that high school---I'm sorry---that college scouts would go to and the requirements were that all of the students were supposed to be two years above grade level in reading and math. And I had attended a meeting in the fall that the principal conducted reminding us that as counselors and a direct quote was that, "Many of you are women and sometimes women have very soft hearts but we really need to make sure that the children who we receive have the academic ability to handle this stressful situation." Well, at the end of the period when the kids were being referred and accepted I had a number of girls---because our school my elementary school had a wonderful honors program---I had a number of girls and boys who were qualified in terms of being at least two years above level---some were four or five years above level. But the high school only accepted a certain number so I had to tell---and I sent an equal number of girls and boys. I had a number of very disappointed students who wanted to get into that high school, so I had to do a lot of work in terms of comforting and trying to find alternative schools for them. Well, about a week after the process had formally ended I got a call from the counselor at the high school asking me to send the records of these five boys. And I said, "Oh, I'm sure you must have made a mistake. Their combined scores would barely get them into any high school." I said, "It certainly wouldn't get them into a high school that has such stringent academic requirements." I said, "So I'm sure you must have made a mistake." So she called back and she said, "No. These are the kids." And I said, "Well, who gave you their names." And she said, "The coach." And I said, "What do you mean 'the coach'?" She said, "The coach said that these boys,"---they were all boys--- "were going to be accepted into the high school." So I said, "There's no way." I said, "They're only passing from us because of age requirements." She said, "I don't know what to tell you." So I said, "Wait a minute." And then it hit me: all of these boys were boys who had played basketball. And this high school was known both for its academic achievement, but also was a---well-known for its sports program.

And I went off. I told her, "If one, one of those boys," I said, "And you can take this message to your principal and I'm going to give it to mine. If one boy out of that group is accepted into your high school and any student in this honors program, who qualifies and wants to go to your school, is not accepted I am

going to help the parents to start a class action suit against the city board of education." And I knew my principal was very close friends with the principal of that high school, so I went downstairs and I told my principal the same thing. That if one of those boys was accepted into that high school and any of my students---girls or boys---were not accepted who met all of the academic qualifications, that I intended to notify each and every parent and also give them the name of a lawyer who would help them to start a class action suit. And that I would personally testify about the gross discrimination that was made on the basis of athletic ability and no academic ability. And that was really a---just almost a catalytic event for me. And I did get exactly what I wanted. They found space for all of my kids who wanted to go and I realized then that the problem of sexism---because the people who would have been most discriminated against were the girls because there were a disproportionate number of girls who really met the qualifications and who did not get in. And so that was it for me. And I made a decision---in fact this was June so I probably got into the organization in July. This was June of 1976 and I looked in the phonebook to find out if there were any organizations that were women's organizations and I happened to see the name of the black feminists.

Q: Okay. So you just got it through the phonebook---let your fingers do the walkin'.

DP: That's right. Exactly. I was enraged by that.

Q: And how did you become Chairperson? Is that an elected position?

DP: Well, to some extent. I mean, it was---Brenda and I are really a lot alike in many ways and we're very good friends and as a result of getting into the organization---and I had a number of skills. I was a counselor and there was very much a need to have someone who could facilitate the consciousness raising groups who had had training. And I was very active and, y'know, I got along very well with the other members and, y'know, speaking and organizing activities that and I was pretty good at.

[End of the pre-interview; was unable to do a full interview later]